

INSIDE ART

By Carol Vogel

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A Rare Trove Of Moderns

November may seem a long way off, but to auction house experts, who spend their summers scrambling for material for the big fall sales, it's just around the corner.

Christie's has secured one major collection to build its sales of Modern, postwar and contemporary art around. It is quite secretive about the source, saying only that it is a private American collection. But experts in the field say the group of paintings and sculptures -- all carefully chosen examples by Modern and contemporary masters like Alexander Calder, Cy Twombly and Jasper Johns -- are from the collection of Dr. Paul and Dorie Sternberg, Chicago philanthropists.

Dr. Sternberg, a prominent ophthalmologist who died in March, was a life trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago, as well as a major supporter of the Museum of Contemporary Art there. He and his wife spent 40 years collecting. Over the last decade they bought blue-chip contemporary art, primarily through Matthew Marks, the Manhattan dealer. Mrs. Sternberg has kept many of their purchases, including works by Ellsworth Kelly, Brice Marden and Mr. Johns.

"It's old-style collecting," said Brett Gorvy, a co-head of Christie's department of postwar and contemporary art. "It was put together over a long period of time, with passion and intellect."

The auction house plans to divide the collection, placing earlier works by artists like Giacometti, Miró and Picasso in its sale of Impressionist and Modern art on Nov. 4 and those by Calder, Mr. Twombly and Mr. Johns at its evening sale of postwar and contemporary art on Nov. 10.

Among the highlights is one of Mr. Johns's classic cross-hatch paintings. Executed in 1981-82, the untitled work in deep reds, blues and greens features a skull, one of the artist's leitmotifs, on the right side of the canvas. Christie's estimates that the painting will bring about \$5 million.

Also for sale are three works by Mr. Twombly. Two are untitled paintings. One, from 1971, is one of the artist's signature blackboard images, on a white background with grays, browns and strong blacks. It is estimated at \$6 million. The other, created in 1962, is from the artist's "Roma" series and is expected to bring \$4 million. There is also a 1981-82 two-panel oil-and-crayon on paper with the artist's traditional swirling forms; it is estimated at \$800,000.

Among the earlier works are several Calder's. One of the rarest is "Baby Flat Top," a steel standing mobile sculpture from 1946, estimated at \$2 million.

It is no accident that the Sternberg collection landed at Christie's, which competed with Sotheby's for the property. Art experts said Christie's was more aggressive, not only in its estimates but also in the guarantee (an undisclosed sum promised to a seller regardless of a sale's outcome), which they said was about \$30 million, more than the low estimate for the collection.

Mr. Gorvy confirmed that the auction house had given the Sternberg Family Corporation a guarantee, but would not say what it was.

"This is prime material," he said. "It's all beautiful and of the highest caliber, and we won the business by being aggressive." It is a gamble, he acknowledged, but one that he thinks is worth it. All summer, Mr. Gorvy said, he has been called by collectors looking for signature pieces by Modern and contemporary masters. What makes this collection so appealing, he added, is that none of it has been on the market for decades.

Making an Entrance

For the first time in more than a decade, the Conceptual artist Allan McCollum is producing three new sculptures for his "Perfect Vehicles" series, which he began in 1985. And the work will be his first to be shown outdoors in New York.

The sculptures, in the shape of giant Chinese ginger jars, have been fashioned from glass-fiber-reinforced concrete and painted with solid, bold colors. They will be at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza, flanking the southeast entrance to Central Park, at 60th Street, from Sept. 8 until February, when Christo and Jeanne-Claude's "Gates" project will be installed.

"It's the first time we've thought about the Doris Freedman Plaza as a gateway to the park," said Tom Eccles, director of the Public Art Fund, a nonprofit organization that presents art around the city. "Generally, we've used the space as an open-air art gallery."

Mr. Eccles said it was also important to the Public Art Fund to show the work of a New York artist. "We've gotten so well known for commissioning international artists," he said, "but we have a great enthusiasm for New York artists, too."

Mr. Eccles said he hoped the nearly 10-foot-tall sculptures would go to museums after the show.

Read All About It

Since Louise Blouin MacBain resigned as chief executive of Phillips, du Pury & Company in December 2002, she has been a woman with a mission: to take information about art to the masses. First she bought Art + Auction magazine; then Art Knowledge Corporation, which publishes the Museums Magazines; Spoon magazine, which deals with fashion, art and photography; and now Art Now Inc., publisher of the Gallery Guides, handouts at galleries around the country. The guides are published in seven regional editions: New York, Boston/New England, Chicago/Midwest, West Coast, Philadelphia/Mid-Atlantic, Southeast and Southwest. Between Museums Magazines and the Gallery Guides -- both free -- Ms. MacBain says she will reach more than 12.5 million readers a year.

With all these publications combined, Ms. MacBain said she wanted to be the world's most comprehensive resource on art. She plans to put out the Gallery Guides and Museum Magazines throughout Europe, too, merging the publications where the markets are small.

"We'll be redesigning them," she said, although they will still be the same pocketbook size. "We're planning on putting more information in them, like a cultural Time Out." She said she planned to feature recommendations for nearby restaurants, along with listings of cultural films and documentaries and a section for art-related family activities.

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